The Marin Community Foundation Project Review System
Components and Use

The Marin Community Foundation's Project Review System consists of the following components:

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Summary of the Project Review System: This introductory summary will give applicants an overview of the Project Review System and will be included in the Foundation's grant application package.

Questions and Answers About the Project Review System: These questions and answers will explain the operation of the system and the roles and responsibilities of grantees and Foundation Project Officers. This document will be included in the grant award letter as the formal introduction to the Project Review System.

Glossary of Project Review Terms: The glossary will be attached to the system description and will explain key project review terms and concepts.

Semi-Annual Report: Asking six core questions, this form will be required for many grantees. Optional questions can be added to meet the reporting needs of particular projects.

Annual Report Designed for almost all grantees, this form will ask eight core questions and allows for optional questions, as required.

Final Report: Containing 15 core questions and required for almost all grantees, this form is the most comprehensive project review component. Optional questions may be added to the core questions, as required.

Finance Report: A comprehensive analysis of project expenditures, income, and cash reserves. This form can be completed at the semi-annual, annual, and/or final reporting periods. It is anticipated that this form will be submitted by grantees at the annual and final project review reporting periods.

Proposed Budget: Submitted with the initial application, this form will detail anticipated expenditures, income, and cash reserves. The Proposed Budget also may be used during a project to request a funding change.

Loan Report: This form is intended for loans only and will include specially-designed questions. Reports will be submitted annually, with a final report at the end of the loan term.

The Review Process:

Prospective applicants will learn about the Foundation's Project Review System from the summary that will be part of the application package. Included in the grant approval letter will be the Project Review package containing a comprehensive question and answer description of the system, the glossary, and the Semi-Annual, Annual, Final, and Finance reporting forms. Prior to finalizing the terms of the award, Project Officers and grantees will meet to negotiate reporting intervals, the core and optional questions that will be answered in each interval, and the dates for submitting the forms. An approximate date for the annual site visit also will be established at this time.

These agreements will become part of the grant award contract.

The Foundation will be responsible for sending each grantee the appropriate reporting forms at the intervals specified in the grant award contract.

Summary
of the
Marin Community Foundation's Project Review System

Project review has been established within the framework of the Foundation's program evaluation responsibilities and requirements. Project review is an important and integral part of the Foundation's grant program. In its statement of purpose, the Foundation commits itself to "...regularly assess the progress of its grantees in achieving their charitable objectives by measuring results against the objectives for which the support was awarded." The Buck Trust, which funds the majority of the Foundation's grants, requires the Foundation to "...regularly examine the consequences of its activities and programs in light of their long-term results."

Project reviews are conducted primarily by grantees and are designed to promote a comprehensive examination of project progress, success, and congruence with program area goals and the mission and purposes of the Foundation. However, the Project Review System is not intended or designed to force grantees to redesign or restructure their information collection and analysis systems. Rather, project reviews are designed to provide grantees with information about the grant which is useful to them and to the Foundation. Reviews focus on three primary areas: project goals and objectives, project activities and conditions, and budgets.

Specifically, project reviews are designed to:

- document the degree or level of achievement of specific project objectives;
- document the degree to which project activities are effective and efficient in carrying out project objectives;
- identify obstacles to progress, problem areas, and unanticipated difficulties, and institute appropriate corrections;
- assure that grant funds are used for the purposes for which they were awarded and are accounted for in a manner consistent with accepted budgeting and accounting methods; and,
- provide a mechanism for project management and agency board members to identify the strengths and weaknesses of projects.

Responsibilities for project reviews are shared by grantees and Foundation Program Officers. Working together, they develop strategies for conducting project review self-

assessments, select program elements for review, select objectives which can be measured, and identify grantee board, management, and staff roles in project review activities.

Project reviews consist of self-assessment reports and site visits
and budgets. Project review questions and financial and budget forms guide this self-appraisal process. Site visits provide opportunities for grantees and Program Officers to observe project activities and discuss progress and plans.

Project reviews are done twice each year, usually at six month intervals. Special circumstances can change that schedule to meet the needs of a project. Site visits usually are conducted annually.

The project review process starts when the terms of a grant are negotiated with the grantee. The Program Officer outlines the project review requirements, usually consisting of semi-annual and annual project questions and financial reports. Baseline data are collected from the application or just before the funding begins. At the same time, semi-annual and annual project review questions and financial reports are selected by the Program Officer and the grantee. Reporting schedules and formats are tailored to grantees' specific circumstances and finalized as funding is about to begin.

Project review materials, consisting of project review questions and financial reporting forms, are based on the general and specific application review criteria developed for each funding area. These criteria help direct funding decisions and are part of the grant application information package. The project reviews are used by the Foundation to look at the funded programs, not compare programs with one another.

Project review questions fall into two categories: core questions required for all grantees and supplementary questions that are based on project focus and needs. Supplementary questions pertain to particular projects and examine specific areas of interest to Program Officers and grantees. Usually the supplementary questions are selected to examine the parts of programs that are most critical or valuable to describe.

Supplementary questions initially are suggested by Foundation Program Officers who then consult with grantees. This process ensures the selection of supplementary questions that are appropriate, meaningful, and answerable.

Each grantee will receive all required and supplementary questions as the first step to identifying questions and setting project review schedules.

Grantees may be asked to address some of the following issues:

- the ongoing consistency between project components (rationale, goals, objectives, and activities) and Foundation policies and priorities;

- the extent to which the project addresses documented needs for

which services are not available;

- the extent to which the project is accepted and supported by project participants or target groups and the community;
- grantees' board, management, and staff support of the project;
- the capacity of the grantee to conduct the project successfully;
- the appropriateness of the project's budget, expenditures, and administration in terms of project activities;
- project achievements and effectiveness; and,
- the ability to develop support and resources to continue the project beyond the Foundation's commitment.

Project review results are reported on specially designed forms. Each grantee will receive the appropriate forms and training in their use well in advance of project review dates. In most cases, project review activities will require only small amounts of additional effort. Most required data are either routinely collected or easily derived from information already collected.

Additional information about all aspects of the project review process will be provided to grantees as final terms of the grants are decided. The Foundation looks forward to working with grantees in this exciting and rewarding program.

Questions and Answers About The Project Review System

Why does the Marin Community Foundation have a project review system?

Project review has been established within the framework of the Foundation's program evaluation responsibilities and requirements. Program evaluation is an important and integral part of the Foundation's grant program. In its statement of purpose, the Foundation commits itself to "...regularly assess the progress of its grantees in achieving their charitable objectives by measuring results against the objectives for which the support was awarded." The Buck Trust, which funds the majority of the Foundation's grants, requires the Foundation to "...regularly examine the consequences of its activities and programs in light of their long-term results."

Project reviews are conducted primarily by grantees and are designed to promote a comprehensive examination of project progress, success, and congruence with Foundation goals and the Foundation's mission and purposes. This self-examination process benefits both grantees and the Foundation by documenting project activities and results and feeding back information about these results to project staff and boards.

What is the project review system?

Project review is a key part of the Foundation's overall evaluation program. The review is a self-assessment and reporting process that provides feedback on the status and progress of funded projects to agency management and board members and to Foundation staff. This feedback focuses on three primary areas: project goals and objectives, project activities and environment, and budgets.

The Foundation's project review process has been designed to:

- describe the degree or level of achievement of specific project objectives;
- describe effectiveness and efficiency in carrying out project objectives, with particular attention to target groups;
- identify barriers to progress, problem areas, and unanticipated difficulties, and institute appropriate corrections;
- assure that grant funds are used for the purposes for which they were awarded and are accounted for in a manner consistent

with accepted budgeting and accounting methods; and,

- provide a mechanism for project management and agency board members to identify the strengths and weaknesses of projects.

Project review, then, is a systematic observation, assessment, and reporting of project performance and accomplishments. It is concerned primarily with relationships between what is proposed and what actually happens.

Who is responsible for project reviews?

Responsibilities for project reviews are shared by grantees and Foundation Program Officers. Working together, they develop strategies for conducting project review self-assessments, select program elements for review, select measurable objectives, and identify grantee board, management, and staff roles in project review activities.

What are the components of the project review process?

Project reviews consist of self-assessment reports and site visits. Both activities are designed to focus on project goals and objectives, project activities and conditions, and budgets. Project review questions and financial and budget forms guide this self-appraisal process. Site visits provide opportunities for grantees and Program Officers to observe project activities and discuss progress and plans.

How often are project reviews done?

Usually twice each year, although special circumstances can change that schedule. New, high risk projects may require more frequent reports, while well-established projects may require less frequent reporting. After the initial baseline data are collected, grantees generally submit semi-annual and annual year-end progress reports. Site visits usually are conducted annually. Baseline project review information usually is collected through the application process. Final decisions about the frequency of reports and site visits are made jointly by grantees and Program Officers.

When does the project review process start?

The process starts when the terms of a grant are negotiated with the grantee. The Program Officer outlines the project review requirements, usually consisting of semi-annual and annual project questions and financial reports. Baseline data are collected from the application or just before the funding begins. At the same time,

semi-annual and annual project review questions and financial reports are selected by the Program Officer and the grantee. Reporting schedules and formats are tailored to grantees' specific circumstances and finalized as funding is about to begin.

What are project review materials and how are they selected and used?

These materials, consisting of project review questions and financial reporting forms, are based on the general and specific application review criteria developed for each funding area. These criteria help direct funding decisions and are part of the grant application information package.

Project review questions fall into two categories: core questions required for all grantees and supplementary questions that are based on project focus and needs. Supplementary questions pertain to particular projects and examine specific areas of interest to Program Officers and grantees. Usually the supplementary questions are selected to examine the parts of programs that are most critical or valuable to describe.

Supplementary questions initially are suggested by Foundation Program Officers who then consult with grantees. This process ensures the selection of supplementary questions that are appropriate, meaningful, and answerable.

Each grantee will receive all required and supplementary questions as the first step to identifying questions and setting project review schedules.

What topics do project review questions address?

Project review questions are concerned with several key areas:

- the consistency between project components (rationale, goals, objectives, and activities) and Foundation policies and priorities;
- the extent to which the project addresses documented needs for which services are not available;
- the extent to which the project is accepted and supported by project participants or target groups, similar organizations, and the community in general;
- grantees' board, management, and staff support of the project;
- the capacity of the grantee to conduct the project

successfully;

- the appropriateness of the project's budget, expenditures, and administration in terms of project activities;
- project achievements, effectiveness, and barriers to successful completion of the project; and,
- the ability to develop support and resources to continue the project beyond the Foundation's commitment.

What planning steps are necessary to answer the project review questions?

Providing clear, accurate, and concise answers to the project review questions will require careful planning and forethought. The primary way to develop objective answers to the project questions is by collecting and analyzing appropriate data on an ongoing basis. Data are nothing more than information that describes or documents activities or processes and helps to answer a particular project review question or issue.

The first planning step in this process is to examine the project review questions you are required to answer and identify the types of data needed to answer each question. Questions can be answered by different types of appropriate data. For example, a question about changes in objectives since the start of the project will require data related to the original project objectives, the new objectives, the reasons why the changes were made, and the effects of these changes. A question about changes in the local or regional needs for this project will require needs assessment or demographic data related to original needs, changes in those needs, and the reasons for those changes.

Once the appropriate data are identified for each project review question, the sources of data must be identified. Some data will be routinely collected as part of the grantee's usual program activities. Other data will have to be collected for the first time from new sources. Non-profit organizations frequently collect four categories of data to support their operations: administrative activities (staffing, reporting, training), service activities (quantity and types of service, clients served, client demographics), ancillary activities (service access and availability, committee meetings), and fiscal activities (income, expenses, balances).

Plans should then be made to gather both new and already collected data. Sources of new data and data collection strategies must be identified and established. A data collection schedule for new and existing sources that coincides with project review reporting intervals must then be developed.

Data analysis strategies and schedules also must be established.

Grantees should work closely with Program Officers throughout data collection and analysis planning to assure that realistic, accurate, efficient, and effective approaches are developed.

What data are appropriate for project reviews?

Always select project review data that provide clear, accurate, concise, and appropriate answers to the questions asked. These data should answer the questions asked with the greatest precision at the lowest possible dollar, time, and energy costs.

Project review data must be both reliable and valid. Reliable data are consistent and accurate measures of reality (e.g., accounting data that accurately and consistently portray expenditures). Valid data actually represent what they claim to represent (e.g., accounting data about travel expenses actually collects and presents travel expense information).

Data from a variety of sources, collected in different ways, can be appropriate for project reviews. Sources and collection methods will be discussed in the answer to the next question.

Appropriate data are also economically and efficiently identified, collected, and analyzed.

Grantees should work closely with Program Officers to establish specific parameters for appropriate data.

How are these data collected and analyzed?

Data should be collected as efficiently and unobtrusively as possible. To the greatest extent possible, data previously collected for project management purposes should be used to meet project review requirements. Often small format modifications to existing sources can make them appropriate for project review data collection. Only initiate new data collection methods when no other appropriate measures are available.

Project review data must be collected regularly, according to schedules established in the data collection plan. Data that are not collected when available (e.g., intake information, visit information, construction progress) usually cannot be reconstructed efficiently after the fact and are often lost for the purposes of project review.

Select data sources carefully. Be sure that the source selected can provide the data required. Data sources include existing records, routinely collected

information, and activity observations. Additional sources are staff, management, and board members; clients, project participants, advisory committees, community representatives, and experts; and computer-based management information systems. Data can be recorded on a variety of forms and documents, including intake forms, activity reports, weekly or monthly summary reports, accounting records, observation reports, interviews, and questionnaires.

Some examples of more sophisticated data sources:

- Data samples are sometimes used when it is impractical or too expensive to gather information about all project activities or events. Samples should represent the whole of a project's reality to the greatest extent possible. Samples are commonly collected in four ways: by case studies, by random selection, by purposeful selection, and by time-limited observations.

- Case studies follow a small number of program activities or participants over a given time period to document project progress, procedures, and data collection. If these cases are not typical, generalizations drawn from them may be misleading or inaccurate.

- Random samples select a small number of data sources that are randomly selected from all available data sources. Random selection, if properly done, results in data that represent all project data. Conclusions drawn from studying randomly selected data can apply to the entire project.

- Data obtained by purposeful selection are picked for a particular reason and the observations made of those data have limited generalizability. Data selected about a particular part of an arts project can answer review questions about just that part of the project and not the project as a whole.

- Data from time-limited observations are collected in a specific time period, such as a week or a month. If the time period selected is typical of the entire project, then the data can answer questions about the project as a whole. Often, however, conclusions drawn from time-limited data are restricted to the specific time period when the data were gathered.

Analysis of project review data usually consists of classifying and compiling data. Once compiled, data can be examined using basic statistical analysis techniques of range, median, mode, standard deviation, measures of association and

correlation, and cross-tabulated displays. The analysis methods selected will depend on the available data and the project review questions those data must answer.

Specific approaches to data collection and analysis should be developed collaboratively with Program Officers.

How are the results of project reviews reported?

Project review results are reported on specially designed forms. Each grantee will receive the appropriate forms and training in their use well in advance of project review dates.

How much effort will be required to complete each project review?

In most cases, project review activities will require only small amounts of additional effort. Most required data are either routinely collected or easily added to other data activities.

The key to minimizing any additional workload is to collect, review, and analyze data regularly (e.g., daily, weekly or monthly).

What happens at the site visit?

For most projects site visits will be a yearly event. Special circumstances, however, may require these visits to occur more or less frequently. The general purpose of the visit is to review project progress and activities by observing operations, touring facilities, and talking with staff, management, board members, and project participants.

The site visit is based on the most recent project review report and any other information given to the Program Officer by the grantees. One or several Program Officers may comprise the site visit team.

Site visit time, place, duration, and format are planned jointly by grantees and Program Officers, well in advance of the visit.

GLOSSARY

Administrative activities - those parts of projects that support services or other primary project activities. Administrative activities include staffing, training, technical assistance, planning, record-keeping, reporting, project review, evaluation, buying and storing equipment and supplies, and maintenance.

Advocacy - actions which are intended to create and support changes in people, institutions, or public policy.

Ancillary activities - those parts of projects that develop and enhance service access and availability, implement community relations and outreach, support boards of directors and committees, coordinate services, provide publicity, and support advocacy.

Appropriate data - information that provides clear, accurate, and concise answers to the project review questions.

Baseline data - information collected at the beginning of a project that determines the initial state of the project and the sponsoring organization. Baseline data are collected from the funding application or just before project funding begins.

Case study - a project review technique that describes a small number of program activities or participants over a given time period to document project progress, procedures, and data collection.

Data - information that describes or documents activities, processes, or conditions and helps to answer a particular question or issue.

Data analysis - methods of classifying, compiling, statistically testing, and explaining information to provide answers to project review questions.

Data collection plan - a systematic process that examines project review questions, identifies the types of data that are appropriate for answering the questions, identifies sources of appropriate data, and establishes timetables for gathering and analyzing both new and already collected data.

Data sources - records, reports, observations, and people providing information describing or documenting activities, processes, or a condition.

Demographic data - information describing people, including age, gender, income, education, occupation, religion, race, home ownership, etc.

Fiscal activities - those parts of projects relating to income, expenses, and associated record-keeping.

Funded projects - activities supported by foundations, governments, and individuals.

Goals - broad, general statements of anticipated accomplishments. Goals reflect an organization's purposes and the ideals to which it aspires.

Needs assessment - a process which identifies individual, group, or community problems using information collected from people with the problems, service providers, the public, experts, and surveys.

Objectives - statements specifying how much of what will be accomplished by whom and by when. Objectives are specific, relatively short-range, and focus on the results (ends) of activities, processes, or interventions. Objectives can always be evaluated.

Program evaluation - a broad and comprehensive process that examines the efficiency and effectiveness of project planning, project review, and the project components or services.

Project effectiveness - measures of the extent to which project objectives are met.

Project efficiency - measures of resources used (money, time, labor, material) in relation to the number of people served or units of effect produced.

Project review - a process that examines project progress, performance and accomplishments. It is concerned primarily with relationships between what projects say they will do before the project starts (objectives and activities) and what actually happens.

Project review questions - information gathering strategies that document the consistency between project components (rationale, goals, objectives, and activities) and funder policies and priorities, the extent to which the project addresses needs, the extent to which the project is accepted and supported, the administrative capacity of the project, the appropriateness of the project's budget and expenditures, project achievements and effectiveness, and the project's ability to develop support and resources to continue the project beyond the Foundation's commitment.

Project review requirements - agreements between project management and funders that define the project review questions and reporting schedules for semi-annual, annual, final, and financial reports.

Purposeful sample - a subset of a population selected for a particular reason or because that subset has attributes of interest. Observations made of this subset cannot be generalized to the population from which the subset came.

Random sample - a subset of the population selected by chance alone. Observations made of this subset can be generalized to the population from which the subset came.

Reliable data - information that is a consistently accurate representation of reality. Data that are perfectly reliable have no error from any source.

Reporting process - forms, site visits, and other activities used to describe the results of project reviews and evaluations.

Sample - a subset of the population or activity being studied.

Self-assessment - a process by which project personnel conduct project reviews, examining project progress, performance, and accomplishments.

Service activities - those parts of projects that assist clients or communities meet needs, overcome problems, create change, or support innovation. Objectives define service activities and enable them to be assessed.

Site visit - a review of project progress and activities by observing operations, touring facilities, and talking with staff, management, board members, and project participants.

Time-limited observations - information collected in a specific time period, such as a day, a week, or a month. Conclusions drawn from time-limited observations usually are restricted to the specific time period when the data were gathered.

Valid data - information that actually measures what it claims to measure.